

Reclaiming Voice in Select Indian Women Poets

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Abstract:

One's sex is not the reason to stop any voice in the era of Women Empowerment. Though the struggle is constant for past many years but practically women empowerment is still an illusion far from reality. Martha Burke, in the introduction of the book titled, *50 Ways to Improve Woman's Lives: The Essential Women's Guide to Achieving Equality, Health and Success*, quotes, the motto of National Council of Women's Organization, stating the path, women has covered, in following words, "One woman can change the world- but it's easier when you work in groups. Discover what works best for your group, meet monthly, and together, we can change the world. Think about how much we have already done" (pg xv). Feminists, such as- Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Candy Stanton, Helene Cixous, Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf etc., time to time, gathered, typically to advocate and support the rights and equality of women through various means of collective revolutionary reforms in socio-political setup that are still in process of improvement, towards attaining Gender Equality.

Through the poems of Kamala Das, Sujata Bhatt and Eunice De Souza, paper intent to explore how female sex is using their gender and privilege to reclaim their voice and right to express unconventionally. The basic concern of the paper is to point out the problems of female sex and present the status of Women Empowerment through breaking of the silence in literary narratives and read out the voice of women, in mainstream literary texts, with the aim to shake the Phallogocentric model of Language (dominated by Male) and liberate women's history from ignorance, and also give them space to be visible by reclaiming the female body and voice in the writings of Indian Women Poets.

Keywords: Gender-Inequality, Taboo, Female Pleasures, Self-assertion, Articulation.

We observe in our daily lives how women still become victimized by various social inequalities. Since the time of struggle for voting rights, educational rights, and right of equal opportunities for both sexes, the female sex has faced inequality when compared with the dominant sex. According to the Gender Gap Index of 2013, declared by World Economic Forum, India was ranked 101 out of 136 countries, which clears the picture of India's inequality and the path that is still uncovered in order to bridge the gap between the Genders. Things that are normalized in current scenario were once prohibited for Women sex, and several measures were taken to prevent the involvement of female into the Symbolic System (as suggested by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), French Psychoanalyst). Women are expected to be silent, and if they refuse to stay silent, their voices are either ignored or their bodies are raped, in order to exercise power over them. Women are tortured and forced into silence by snatching right to articulate in public domain.

Indian English poetry has been emerging after the British rule, but it has its roots in the pre-independent era. Indian women poetry from Toru Dutt to Sarojini Naidu, although has taken many forms but the element of self-assertion was still absent. Despite its strengths and passion, it lacked the sense of intimacy and immediacy of personal experiences of women's plight and pleasure. As Balibar mentions in his essay "Literature as an Ideological Form", ". . . the production of literary effects historically as part of the ensemble of social practice" (Waugh 61). To pluck out the binary division from the gender studies, the silence of women must be read from time to time as it will help healing her mutilation (by Phallogocentrically framed language, practiced since ages in the form of language and narratives) and establish, that, right to speak, and to be heard, is not limited to any one sex. Poems discussed in the paper, mark the presence of the private sphere of female body and voice, which was missing in the early set of writings done by Indian women poets.

Here in my study of issues, that are close to taboo, pleasure principles, subjects that are censored and untouched by the real voices and real experiences are getting existences in the poems of eminent women poets, which stands as a response to shatter pre-existing phallogocentric literature and also to what Lacan mentions, "a woman cannot speak of her pleasure" (Waugh 483), (also quoted by Helene Cixous in her essay "Castration or Decapitation?") the idea is also challenged with these strong voices that uses 'Confessionalism' in their use of words. As we know modifying the body promotes symbolic rebellion, resistance, and self-transformation and so, marking the body linguistically, can symbolically reclaim the female body and voice from its victimization and objectification in patriarchal culture.

While exploring Indian women poets we find that women's poetry takes a sudden courageous turn with the advent of Kamala Das or Kamala Surayya (born Kamala; 31 March 1934 – 31 May 2009), best known for her short stories and autobiography *My Story*, while her oeuvre in English, is noted for her poems basically presenting strong voice of female. From writings of Kamala Das, – “An Introduction”, “In Love”, “My Grandmother's House”, “Dance of the Eunuchs”, etc., - the poem, that is discussed forth is- “The Freaks”, a short lyric written in confessional manner, where she presents the picture of a lady with her husband in their personal space. The spontaneity with which she captures the intimate moment that is found to be rare in the context of Indian writing, makes her the pioneer of developing Indian feminine sensibility. Das in her poem presents and projects her own self that makes it confessional in nature.

The poet through the lines portrays physical intimacy and at the same time displeasure of male partner as felt by the female, thus the whole poem takes the reader towards the voicing out of female pleasures, her wants, her desires and her expectations from male partner. Kamala Das, while pointing out the position of relationship of a lady with her husband and the kind of emotions and feeling surviving in between them, in her poem “The Freaks” writes,

An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling of silence. ... (15-17).

In these lines she gives repelling expression of coiling of snakes or emptiness in her heart. The feeling of unhappiness at the most intimate moment pervades between the partners, which Kamala Das has highlighted using words such as “sun-stained”, “dark cavern”, “tripping idly”, “man with nimble finger tips”, etc., references that further suggests the negative feeling of female towards love making. Kamala Das is bold enough to speak out the realism of her marital relation with her husband, in these lines,

I am a freak. Its only
To save my face. I flaunt, at
Times, a good flamboyant lust (18-20).

The poem ends with the poet labeling the lady as a ‘Freak’, who flaunts her sexual desires in front of husband. Kamala Das swiftly involve the concept of marital rape (lack of consent of married women for sex), within the patriarchal society wherein she is expected to work in a particular manner. Going against the Patriarchal norms poet points out her urge for spiritual desires, emotional desires, but due to cultural constrains had to fake her sexual aspect.

According to the social norms her surrender in love making makes her husband, the authority figure and she herself becomes a suppressed being who had to pretend to like it no matter what she feels towards it. Kamla Das tried to speak of the sex and the displeasure in order to sensitize the readers towards the topics that are never discussed like that of 'Marital Rape' or sex in marriage.

Similarly, Sujata Bhatt (born 1965) has been recognized as a distinctive voice in contemporary poetry for raising other taboo issues. By placing the female body as central and integral to her experience of self—a source of pleasure, creativity, and empowerment—Sujata Bhatt's poems not only presents her grounded position of the erased and exiled female body (that is so far seen through the consistent perspective of male) but also construct a textual space that allows the hitherto silenced women's bodies to be heard in her poems.

Bhatt gives voice to the overpowering desire of a pregnant woman to indulge in the sexual act in her poem "White Asparagus". The female persona, by expressing surprise at the strength of sexual desire, Sujata Bhatt defies the cultural shame attached with the female speaking of her sexual desires streaming through the legs and the breasts, in the starting lines of "White Asparagus" as mentioned,

Who speaks of the strong currents
streaming through the legs, the breasts
of a pregnant woman
in her fourth month? (1-4).

By speaking of "the rushing tide/ that awakens/ her slowly increasing blood —?", Bhatt challenges the patriarchal logic that sees women only as units of reproduction. Bhatt's poem presents the surging bodily desires of the pregnant woman and thus she celebrates the unspoken sensuality of the woman's body.

These powerful voices emerging from time to time had worked as an agency to subvert silence, shatters the history of social practice of silence. The reason for the universality of Silence attached with female sex as suggested by Louise Althusser (1918-1990), famous Marxist Philosopher, is the impact of "Ideological State Apparatus", the institutes, such as family, school, religious structures, etc., that govern our upbringing by monitoring our thinking and regulating actions by making individuals as their subject and because these institutes are governed by Male sex that kept female under their authority as inferior beings, so these social and ideological structures, interferes in the establishing equality among sexes. In order to attain that Equilibrium, the paper points out these changed voices of female poets thus helps erase the fixation of silence from female body and thus

posits, celebratory image of a sexuality that gives pleasure to the female self and body by legitimizing the notion of reclaiming modified female.

In the tradition of giving existence to the unheard female voices on her own self, pleasure and urges, one may not leave Eunice De Souza (1940-2017) a fearless writer in using the tabooed principles of women world. Female self in her poems, is fearlessly marching forward to create some textual space and gain textual liberty in vocalizing her innermost unseen self. In many of her writings whether it be “De Souza Prabhu”, “Autobiographical”, “Forgive Me, Mother”, “Advice to Women”, “He Speaks”, and many other poems, we find on one hand the treatment of suffering and condition of women and on other hand the reclaiming nature of asserting female self. Eunice De Souza’s writings, (as a carrier of this new ideology) are trying to bring to the surface, the identity of real female and male through distinct perspective of female. Besides the female representation she presents her perception of love making in the following lines from her poem “He Speaks”,

The next time we were making love
I said quite casually:
I hope you realize I do this
With other women (4-7).

In these lines Eunice De Souza harshly criticizes the treatment of the male partner towards his female partner or we could frame the picture of married couple in the two, wherein the male sounds too dominant towards the female and as mentioned above treats the female sex as the inferior. Thus, presents man’s treatment towards woman and woman’s sensibility towards the act of love-making, making readers aware of an overly celebratory position of the authentic woman’s voice, who comments on the man’s casual approach towards female body as a mean of gratification of his sexual desires.

Yet another poem titled, “When God First Made a Whore”, by Charmayne D’Souza creates poetic persona of a whore, who remain, even to this day a topic of silence. Here in the face of whore, poet tries to build her identity through poetic expression. She confidently declares the birth and survival of a whore in the world created by God, which gives the sublime touch to the topic of whore. D’Souza writes,

When God first made a whore,
He took the howl of the wolf,
The flexibility of politician’s
Law,
And the smoothness of guillotine’s

Saw.
Said the Almighty Lord:
“Men, I have given you
The Almighty Broad” (1-9).

Metaphors are used to bring in light the role of whore as dictated by her own self-assertive tone, wherein she compares her body to a railway track and sinking ship. Poet celebrates the body of a prostitute and is outspoken on her take on the society by openly exposing the realism of being a women and whore at the same time. Charmayne D’Souza’s poem helps in carving the identity of a whore and presenting it in the public domain of mainstream literature. In the lines from the poem “When God First Made a Whore”, Charmaune D’Souza declares the strengths of a whore in following manner,

She said- “look after me well,
For upon my body lie many sleepers,
Converging into nothingness
Like a railway track.
My body is a single straw
That shook once in the wind,
And finally broke the came’s back.
It will be last life
left to the cat,
the sinking ship to a deserting rat,
a barren canon booming
in a fertile field of men (10-21).

The strong and assertive personality of a whore in turn discloses the sterile life of the women who come from the strata of whore. The agony and the anguish that was left unspoken since ages is getting voice in the form of this poem which strongly poses the new and real image of women in patriarchal system. Poet is free and frequent in tone and use of language in order to present the recklessness of a prostitute’s life. On one hand the whore is a topic of social disgust on the basis of cultural norms, and on other hand, diving into the stories of these women, we find these whores are created by the hidden lust of the dominant sex, who forces women into the profession of body gratification, that if once satisfied, label these women as inferior and not a civilized part of society. Whores constitute a major part of society but always ignored and neglected by the mainstream cultural patriarch.

Charmayne D'Souza, speak the plight of those women and provide them with the status of divine creatures, she presents the authoritative image of whore even in front of God, and ends her poem "When God First Made a whore", with these words,

One day,
God will ask for this sweaty body
Of mine,
But, like all the rest,
He will have to stand in a line.

So said the whore,
as they asked for more (35-41).

The assertive and the influential self of whore over any other female is presented as the one, who has power to keep God-the Almighty, stand in a queue if he wished to take pleasure from her. Charmayne D'Souza raised the standard of whore from the unethical and threat to traditional value system towards a place where even God falls short in front of her.

From the topic of marital rape, consent, sexual pleasure, casual sex and prostitute Indian women Poetry has covered a vast range of culturally taboo topics that lingered in silence since ages and now with these poems these unheard stories of women from varied background received acknowledgement and helped to sensitize the masses towards the agony lying behind the Silence of women. The tradition of reading the silence is not limited to the Indian women poets mentioned above. There are various other names who are partners in the same business of creating a linguistic space for female body, desires and pleasures. Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande, Charmayne D'Souza etc., had done a huge amount of work in writing down the long existing silence of female. By exploring thoughts and writing down those fearless words of her innermost space, these women writers and poets represented women as a whole and are able to create a linguistic change in their pre-existing identity of hysteric.

Many feminist voices in world literature too, had been raised to collapse the classical traditional system of masculine myth that confirms the universality of Gender inequality, where women are not the part of Symbolic System. Nancy Julia Shodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of Gender* (1978), talks about the social construction and origin of gender roles; Shula Mith Firestone (Canadian), a Radical Feminist, and part of Red Stocking Group with Ellen Willis, also had taken hold of the feminist

revolution whose main concern was to provide literature with real picture of the condition of female in society in the words of female herself.

Thus the concept of J.S.Mill's (1806-1873) 'Perfect Equilibrium' (01), discussed in his book- *The Subjection of Women*, will be possible if female are given Power to articulate and a separate space, as discussed by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in collection of lectures titled *A Room of One's Own*, along with all socio economic independence– a necessary condition for the betterment of female.

With an overly celebratory positioning of the authentic women's voice, the paper marks the shift from tradition of silence to women embarking on body projects, engaging in long-term modifications of cultural and gender norms, and creates a linguistic tradition of articulation of female urges and desires in literature that reflects the feminist project of identity subversion through reclamation of voice.

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